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van Tilburg, Theo G.; Suanet, B.

published in

The Journals of Gerontology. Series B : Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences
2019

DOI (link to publisher)

[10.1093/geronb/gby120](https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gby120)

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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citation for published version (APA)

van Tilburg, T. G., & Suanet, B. (2019). Unmarried older people: Are they socially better off today? *The Journals of Gerontology. Series B : Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 74(8), 1463-1473.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gby120>

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Special Issue: Aging Alone? International Perspectives on Social Integration and Isolation

Unmarried Older People: Are They Socially Better Off Today?

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Received: March 21, 2018; Editorial Decision Date: October 5, 2018

Decision Editor: Deborah Carr, PhD

Abstract

Objectives: Previous studies have shown that unmarried older adults are generally at disadvantage in personal networks and social well-being compared with the married. It can be questioned whether their situation has improved in contemporary society, as among others the stigma of divorce and being never-married has declined. We hypothesize differential developments in networks and well-being according to marital status (married, widowed, divorced, and never-married) across birth cohorts. **Method:** Data are from the 1993 and 2013 observations of the Longitudinal Aging Study Amsterdam on Dutch people aged 55–69 ($N = 2,894$) and 70–84 years ($N = 2,317$). We employ general linear modeling of network size and diversity, received emotional and instrumental support, emotional and social loneliness, and depressive symptoms.

Results: The widowed are better off socially in 2013 than in 1993. Similar to the divorced they have a larger network, and similar to the never-married they receive more emotional support and are less emotional lonely. We find some gender differences in these developments.

Discussion: Societal change has not radically altered networks and well-being of unmarried older people. The widowed seem to benefit most, possibly because they are better able to retain relationships after widowhood.

Keywords: Cohort differences, Gender, Networks, Unmarried, Well-being

Unmarried older adults generally reported smaller networks (Van Tilburg, 1998), higher levels of loneliness (Dykstra & De Jong Gierveld, 2004; Pinquart, 2003), and less well-being (Shapiro & Keyes, 2008). The disadvantages that accompany being unmarried accumulate over a lifetime (Dannefer, 2003). Substantial variation between categories of unmarried older adults exists, with the divorced and widowed having more negative network and well-being outcomes than the never-married (especially women). It can be questioned whether the unmarried are better equipped to maintain networks and well-being in contemporary society.

In contemporary society, personal relationships are less structurally embedded than previously (Giddens, 1990). In this context, the skills to manage a network individually are

more important (Allan, 2008). Additionally, attitudes toward nontraditional family behaviors are more tolerant (Treas, Lui, & Gubernskaya, 2014), in accordance with growing normalization of these behaviors (Lin & Brown, 2012). These changes could improve networks and well-being among unmarried older adults. Therefore, we investigate whether single divorced, widowed, and never-married older adults are socially better off currently than they were previously.

We compare older Dutch adults, aged 55–84 years, in 1993 and 2013 on seven outcomes, i.e., network size and diversity, received emotional and instrumental support, emotional, and social loneliness, and depressive symptoms. The Netherlands is a fairly typical example of a modern industrialized country. Divorce rates are lower

than in the United States (Amato & James, 2010) but are rising (Statistics Netherlands, 2017). Norms and values concerning nontraditional family behavior are among the most tolerant (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). Additionally, cohabitation and living apart together (LAT) relationships are relatively common (Latten, 2004), although less so among cohorts born before 1960. In 1970, among the 50–59-year-old aged people, approximately 85% were married, compared with 75% in 2004. Among those aged 30–39 years old, almost 90% were married in 1970 versus approximately 55% in 2004.

Networks and Well-Being Among the Unmarried

Being unmarried is likely to have consequences for the networks and well-being. Network size is the number of individuals one is in close and frequent contact with (Van Tilburg, 1998). Network diversity is the variation in social roles among network members (Cohen, Doyle, Skoner, Rabin, & Gwaltney, 1997). Size and diversity are structural characteristics of the network. Functional network characteristics refer to support exchanged within these relationships. Loneliness refers to a situation in which the realized relationships do not match people's own preferences and standards with regard to their relationships (De Jong Gierveld & Van Tilburg, 1999). Depression is related to personal network variables and loneliness (Cornwell & Waite, 2009) and specifies the overall emotional state of a person, relating to feelings of hopelessness, sadness, among others.

Arguments have been proposed in the literature for why unmarried older adults tend to be socially disadvantaged. First, in the protection thesis, the marriage partner serves as an important buffer against loneliness and depression (Smith & Christakis, 2008), given that the relationship is of a good quality. Single unmarried older adults are therefore more vulnerable to lacking a confidant and someone who provides them with sufficient support. Second, in the social integration thesis, marriage offers social status (Gibbs, 1969). The loss of a spouse due to divorce lowers social status. The effect of divorce on well-being is long-lasting, even after a new partnership has been found (Williams, 2003). Never-married people also deviate from the norm. Thus, divorced and never-married older adults can be expected to be less well integrated socially, which harms their well-being. For the bereaved, the social status argument is less applicable because widowhood is a more normative life event in old age (Ferraro & Barresi, 1982). Third, the selection thesis suggests that the differences in marital status are the consequence of differential selection (Mastekaasa, 1992), with those who have higher well-being and who are better integrated socially being more likely to be married. Fourth, the strain thesis holds that the differences between the married and previously married stem from the network disruptions and strains associated with

marital transitions. Divorce especially causes the loss of joint relationships (Kalmijn & Broese van Groenou, 2005). This argument is less valid for the never-married.

Studies that compare all three unmarried categories simultaneously are scarce. Often, married people are the reference category. Here, we focus on a handful of studies that take into account all three unmarried categories. Hurlbert and Acock (1990) showed that divorced and never-married U.S. adults have fewer kin and more friends in their networks than the married, and the widowed have more kin than all three other categories and fewer friends than the never-married. Van Tilburg (1995) showed that the married have larger networks than the three categories of unmarried older adults. Dykstra and De Jong Gierveld (2004) concluded that emotional loneliness was higher among singles and those who were ever divorced, but not among those who were ever widowed. The observed effects of marital history and status were not explained by differences in social integration. This study also found that unmarried women, particularly the never-married, are less lonely than unmarried men. Pinguart (2003) found that, among older German adults, the married report lower levels of loneliness compared with the three unmarried categories. The widowed had lower levels of loneliness than the divorced. Men report higher levels of loneliness in all three unmarried categories. Both studies explained gender differences in loneliness among the unmarried based on the stronger ties of unmarried women to family and friends and, in the case of divorce or widowhood, on less dependence on the former partnership for social ties. Finally, a study of Shapiro and Keyes (2008) on the effects of marital history on well-being in midlife in the United States showed that, with the exception of widowed persons and never-married females, married persons reported higher social integration than the unmarried and that being divorced and never-married is associated with lower well-being.

Based on the literature, we expect that the widowed fare best (except in regard to depression), followed by the never-married, and the divorced have the worst outcomes in terms of networks and well-being. We also expect sizeable gender differences, with unmarried men generally being worse off socially than unmarried women.

Cohort Changes in Networks and Well-Being Among the Unmarried

Changes in societal structure and culture might enhance the networks and well-being of divorced and never-married, but not widowed persons during the study period. First, traditional communities that used to protect and constrain individuals, such as churches, neighborhoods, and extended kin, have lost strength. Ties are less structurally embedded than before, and people have become more in charge of building and maintaining their own networks (Allan, 2008). In this environment, skills to build networks as an individual might be more essential. Because ongoing

satisfaction and reciprocity is more important in nonkin ties than among kin, they require more active relationship management by individuals (Allan, 2008). The never-married have networks not tied to a partnership, so they have built these skills over their lifecourse. This also holds for divorced people, who often partly rebuild the network by themselves (Kalmijn & Broese van Groenou, 2005). Widowed people have usually maintained joint networks as a couple and thus have less skills to navigate social ties individually.

Second, there is normalization of nontraditional family behaviors, which affects the social position of the divorced and never-married. Attitudes toward divorce became more accepting in the 1960s and 1970s, after which a high level of acceptance sustained (Latten, 2004). There has been less change in people's attitudes concerning marriage (Treas et al., 2014). Marriage is still highly valued highly; not as a requirement for adulthood, but rather as an optional lifestyle choice (Allan, 2001) or as a marker of achievement and symbolic significance (Cherlin, 2004). The number of divorced has increased substantially between 1990 and 2010 (Brown & Lin, 2012). In such a context, the stigma about the divorced as being underprivileged likely has decreased, resulting in a better social status. Widowhood has traditionally been more accepted as a life event in old age, so it is unlikely that acceptance and stigma ever played a vital role.

Third, an increase in divorce rates throughout most of the Western world (Amato & James, 2010; Latten, 2004) has resulted in more opportunities to befriend others in similar situations. Homophily looms large in social relationships (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). The divorced increasingly befriend other divorced people (McDermott, Fowler, & Christakis, 2013). In the Netherlands, the percentage never-married also rapidly increased between 1970 and 2003 (Latten, 2004). For the widowed, the on average increasing life-expectancy results in people growing old together, leaving fewer people in a similar situation (Brown & Lin, 2012). If widowhood is early, it is increasingly untimely. We conclude that, whereas the divorced and the never-married might benefit from the current societal context, the widowed are less likely to benefit.

We perceive these societal changes as continuous and ongoing, rather than as tied to a specific turning point in time. For example, although individualization has been argued by Allan (2001) to have started in the 1970s, it is also acknowledged that the speed and strength of these developments differ between (categories of) people and societal contexts. We do, however, assume that later birth cohorts of older adults have been influenced stronger by societal changes. For example, the youngest cohort in the current study, born between 1948 and 1957, was between 13 and 22 years old in 1970, a period in which societal changes were likely to have had a profound effect on shaping worldviews and behavior, whereas the oldest cohort,

born 1908–1917, was already past the child rearing phase and at the end of employment phase.

We also expect cohort differences in the networks and well-being of the unmarried based on gender. Women in early cohorts (before the baby boomer generation) often acted as kin keepers, whose well-being was contingent on frequent contact with relatives (Rosenthal, 1985; Salari & Zhang, 2006). More gender equality has followed a process of emancipation, in which the social roles available to women have greatly enlarged (England, 2010; Rijken & Liefbroer, 2016). For example, Dutch women's labor market participation has increased consistently since cohorts from the 1950s matured (Euwals, Knoef, & Van Vuuren, 2011), resulting in a better socioeconomic position and increased sociability. This change is likely to have had a stronger impact for ever-married women than for never-married women, who have always been responsible for their own income. Thus, women might have more resources and opportunities to maintain well-being, whereas for men changes have been less dramatic. It has been argued that men support the liberation of women partly because of benefits it has for them, for example, the increased rights it lends to their own daughters (Doepke & Tertilt, 2009). Male sex roles geared at competition in public life lead to emotionally and psychologically impoverished lives among men. The male emancipatory discourse, however, is generally less influential than women's liberation on female roles (Messner, 1998). As a result of the stronger changes in women's lives, we expect that the gap between unmarried women and men to be larger in 2013 than in 1993, with women being better off.

In sum, we expect that the personal networks and social well-being of unmarried older adults differ between birth cohorts, but not uniformly across categories of unmarried older adults. We hypothesize that the divorced are increasingly better off socially, as stigma surrounding divorce has declined (Hypothesis 1). The widowed are decreasingly well-off socially (Hypothesis 2), because those who are widowed early might be increasingly off-time, and they have not developed individual social skills as much. For never-married older people, we expect no cohort differences (Hypothesis 3), as they traditionally have networks that are not tied to partnerships. We further hypothesize that unmarried women are increasingly better off (Hypothesis 4), due to their social skills and increased socioeconomic chances. No or smaller cohort differences for unmarried men are expected.

Design of the Study

Respondents

Data are from the Longitudinal Aging Study Amsterdam (LASA; Huisman et al., 2011). LASA started in 1992–1993 among 3,107 respondents born in 1908–1937. The sample is stratified according to gender and birth year and is drawn from the population registers of eleven Dutch

municipalities that differ in the degree of urbanization and religion. The response rate was 63%. In 2002–2003, LASA sampled 1,002 respondents born in 1938–1947, adopting the same sampling frame; the response rate was 62%. Similarly, in 2012–2013, LASA sampled 1,023 respondents born in 1948–1957; the response rate was 63%. All samples had three-yearly observations.

We selected respondents with observations in 1992–1993 (further denoted as 1993) and respondents with observations in 2011–2013 (further denoted as 2013). We excluded respondents younger than 55 years and respondents 85 years or older ($N = 279$) and respondents with missing values on all outcomes ($N = 78$). Marital status is increasingly dissimilar to partner status. Among the never-married and widowed, the percentage of people with a partner was higher in 2013 than it was in 1993 (never-married: 9% in 1993, and 25% in 2013; $\chi^2 = 16.4$, $p < .001$; widowed: 8 and 15%, respectively; $\chi^2 = 13.8$, $p < .01$). The percentage of partnered divorced did not differ between 1993 (26%) and 2013 (31%; $\chi^2 = 1.5$). Among the unmarried with a partner, there was not an increase in those with a “living apart together” partnership ($\chi^2 = 0.2$): in 1993, the percentage was 49% ($N = 121$), and in 2013, it was 51% ($N = 157$). Among the married, the percentage that has a partner is, by definition, 100%; although, some respondents are separated from their spouse and others are living apart, for example, due to impairments. Our further analyses pertain to single unmarried respondents (168 never-married in 1993 and 130 in 2013; 117 divorced in 1993 and 140 in 2013; 719 widowed in 1993 and 270 in 2013), unmarried respondents not sharing the household with their partner (LAT relationship; 59 in 1993 and 82 in 2013), unmarried respondents living with a partner (cohabiting; 62 in 1993 and 76 in 2013), and married respondents with an intact partnership sharing the household (1,886 in 1993 and 1,523 in 2013). We refer to these as marital status categories. We had 3,011 respondents aged 55–84 years in 1993 and 2,221 in 2013. The latter were sampled in 1993 or 2003 and had seven and three follow-up observations, respectively, or were sampled in 2013. Among the 1993 respondents, 467 were also included in the 2013 sample.

Measurements

Personal network

Network members are identified by name in seven domains (Van Tilburg, 1998). The following question was asked: “We would like to know who you have regular contact with and who is important to you.” Network size is the number of persons identified, the partner excluded. Network diversity is the number of social roles represented in the network (Cohen et al., 1997), classified into 12 different categories.

Support received

For nine network members (or fewer if fewer are identified) with whom the respondent has the most frequent contact, the emotional and instrumental support received are assessed (Van Tilburg, 1998). For emotional support, we asked, “How often did it happen in the past year that you told ... about your personal experiences and feelings?” For instrumental support, we asked, “...that ... helped you with daily chores in and around the house, such as preparing meals, cleaning the house, transportation, small repairs, filling in forms?” The answer categories were *never*, *seldom*, *sometimes*, and *often*, with values 0–3. The average across the network members is computed.

Loneliness

Emotional loneliness was assessed with a scale of six items; values range from 0 to 6 (De Jong Gierveld & Van Tilburg, 1999). The scale of social loneliness includes five items; values range from 0 to 5. Loevinger’s coefficient for scale homogeneity is .46 and .43, and reliability is .82 and .72 for emotional and social loneliness, respectively. Spearman’s correlation between the two scales is .42 ($p < .001$).

Depressive symptoms were measured with the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression scale. The 20-item scale is designed to measure depressive symptomatology in the general population (Radloff, 1977). Scale scores range from 0 to 60. Cronbach’s alpha is .89.

Procedure

Due to unequal sample sizes in 1993 and 2013, we weighted the data within 72 5-year age, marital status and gender categories in such a way that the resulting sample weight was the average of the 1993 and 2013 sample size (for each $N = 2,613$). None of the female respondents aged 75 years or older in 2013 had an LAT relationship, and the corresponding category in 1993 was excluded ($N = 6$). The analyses were stratified by age. By distinguishing between respondents aged 55–69 and 70–84 years, we looked at whether results varied between the young-old and the old-est. The samples of respondents in 1993 and 2013 are independent in the strata. We tested whether the means of seven outcomes in 1993 and 2013 differ. Furthermore, we tested whether the means among unmarried respondents with partner differ from the means among their married counterparts and among single unmarried respondents (as one category). We conducted t tests. Due to the small number of unmarried respondents with partner, we exclude them from further analyses. An analysis of variance (general linear modeling) in SPSS was applied with the year of observation, gender, and marital status as factors and age as a covariate variable. In testing the hypotheses, the F -statistics for interaction effects including year, were leading, and the interpretation of differences was facilitated by computing estimated marginal means. The means differ when one

mean is not in the 95% confidence interval of the other mean.

Results

The average scores for the seven outcomes are reported in Table 1. Testing of the difference between 1993 and 2013 revealed that, among the young-old, changes were observed for network size ($t = 12.6$) and diversity ($t = 10.2$). The average network size increased from 15.0 to 20.0, and diversity increased from 4.9 to 5.7. Among the oldest, we observed improvement in network size ($t = 8.6$), diversity ($t = 8.2$), instrumental support received ($t = 4.1$), and emotional ($t = 2.1$) and ($t = 2.8$) social loneliness. Often the married were in the most advantaged position, sometimes shared with other categories. There was an exception for instrumental support received from the network, where the widowed received the most support.

We also tested specifically whether the unmarried with a partner were similar to married and to single unmarried respondents. In 1993, the means among the unmarried young-old respondents with an LAT partnership differed from the married on three outcomes: they had smaller networks ($t = 2.5$), received more instrumental support ($t = 2.1$), and were higher in emotional loneliness ($t = 2.1$). In 2013, they had smaller networks ($t = 3.9$) and less diversity in their network ($t = 4.2$). They also differed from the single unmarried. In 1993, they were lower in emotional loneliness ($t = 2.9$), and in 2013 they were lower in emotional ($t = 6.6$) and social ($t = 2.0$) loneliness, and in depressive symptoms ($t = 4.1$). In sum, with regard to differences in means that were significant, young-old unmarried respondents with an LAT partnership were between the means of the categories of married and single unmarried respondents. Among the oldest, there were few unmarried respondents with an LAT partnership. Only 1 out of 28 tests indicated a difference in means. In 2013, unmarried respondents with an LAT partnership had less network diversity ($t = 2.6$) than married respondents.

We observed a different pattern for the unmarried cohabiting with their partner. In 1993, the mean of the young-old for any of the seven outcomes did not differ from the mean of the married. In 2013, the cohabitating unmarried had less network diversity ($t = 2.2$) and fewer depressive symptoms ($t = 2.6$) than the married. There were many differences between the cohabitating unmarried and the single unmarried. In 1993, the cohabitating unmarried had a larger network size ($t = 2.4$), more diversity ($t = 3.1$), and less instrumental support received ($t = 2.2$) and were lower in emotional loneliness ($t = 8.5$) and depressive symptoms ($t = 2.7$). In 2013, they had a larger network size ($t = 3.7$) and more network diversity ($t = 3.8$) and were lower in emotional ($t = 6.6$) and social ($t = 3.5$) loneliness and depressive symptoms ($t = 6.8$). Among the oldest respondents, the cohabitating unmarried had less network diversity in 1993 ($t = 3.8$) and were lower in emotional loneliness

($t = 6.5$) in 2013 than the married. Compared with the single unmarried, both in 1993 and in 2013, the cohabitating unmarried were lower in emotional loneliness ($t = 2.2$ and 12.7 , respectively) and depressive symptoms ($t = 3.0$ and 3.2 , respectively). In sum, the cohabitating unmarried were more similar to the married than to the single unmarried.

Of interest to our hypotheses, we found interactions between the year of observation and marital status (limited to married and single unmarried respondents) for three outcomes (Tables 2 and 3). There was a differential development in the network size among the oldest (Table 3; $F = 2.6$ for the two-way interaction of year and marital status, and $F = 2.7$ for the three-way interaction including gender). As the estimated marginal means show (Figure 1), network size increased for divorced women (4.0 network members more, supporting Hypothesis 1), widowers (3.8) and widows (4.5; in contrast to Hypothesis 2, which predicted a worsening situation), and husbands (2.1) and wives (6.2). Supporting Hypothesis 3, no changes were observed for never-married men and women. Hypothesis 4 is partially supported (i.e., divorced women in 2013 are relatively better off compared with divorced men).

For emotional support received by the young-old, we did not find a main effect of year ($F = 1.1$; Table 2). We did, however, find interaction effects (Figure 2). Rejecting Hypothesis 1, which predicted improvement, divorced women in 2013 received less support (1.97) than those in 1993 (2.26). Increased emotional support is observed among widows (from 1.87 to 1.98) and widowers (from 1.58 to 1.93; both rejecting Hypothesis 2, which predicted a worsening situation) and never-married men (from 1.12 to 1.78; rejecting Hypothesis 3, which predicted stability). Husbands in 2013 receive less support than in 1993 (1.52 and 1.65, respectively). Hypothesis 4, predicting an improvement among unmarried women, is also not supported. The gender gap at the expense of never-married men and widowers in 1993 (0.93 and 0.30, respectively) decreased in 2013 (0.15 and 0.05, respectively).

There were also changes in the emotional support received by the oldest in various marital status categories ($F = 7.1$; Table 3), but these were not gender specific ($F = 1.1$). The emotional support received did not increase significantly among the divorced (thus we reject Hypothesis 1), and increased among the widowed (from 1.59 to 1.76; in contrast to Hypothesis 2) and the never-married (from 1.28 to 1.67; in contrast to Hypothesis 3) (Figure 2). Because the improvements among the unmarried pertained to both men and women, we reject Hypothesis 4.

Finally, there were differential developments in emotional loneliness among the oldest ($F = 4.6$ for the three-way interaction; Table 3). Loneliness did not change among the divorced (rejecting Hypothesis 1), and decreased among widows (from 2.05 to 1.80; rejecting Hypothesis 2) and never-married men (from 1.86 to .57; rejecting Hypothesis 3) (Figure 3). Hypothesis 4 finds partial support due to the improvement among widows (from 2.05 to 1.80) in

Table 1. Means of Seven Outcomes by Year and Marital Status

	Network size (0–80)		Network diversity (0–12)		Emotional support received (0–3)		Instrumental support received (0–3)		Emotional loneliness (0–6)		Social loneliness (0–5)		Depressive symptoms (0–60)	
	1993	2013	1993	2013	1993	2013	1993	2013	1993	2013	1993	2013	1993	2013
Aged 55–69 years														
Single never-married (N = 88)	10.7	13.6	3.0	3.7	1.63	1.86	0.79	0.79	1.76	1.64	1.43	1.40	10.0	9.2
Single divorced (N = 76)	11.0	14.6	3.5	4.4	2.04	1.81	0.74	0.74	1.82	1.99	1.50	1.45	10.0	10.7
Single widowed (N = 123)	13.6	19.6	4.5	5.3	1.82	1.96	1.02	0.88	2.15	2.03	0.88	0.63	10.5	11.2
Unmarried, LAT (N = 42)	12.8	15.9	4.6	4.9	1.93	1.70	0.80	0.71	1.09	0.49	0.97	0.84	9.1	5.9
Unmarried, cohabiting (N = 45)	18.9	21.4	5.8	5.5	1.61	1.69	0.80	0.79	0.46	0.59	0.83	0.64	7.6	4.7
Married (N = 1,071)	15.8	21.0	5.2	6.0	1.77	1.69	0.74	0.80	0.57	0.52	0.69	0.69	6.1	6.4
All (N = 1,444)	15.0	20.0	4.9	5.7	1.78	1.73	0.77	0.80	0.85	0.80	0.81	0.77	7.1	7.1
Aged 70–84 years														
Single never-married (N = 60)	11.1	10.8	2.8	2.9	1.34	1.71	0.67	0.77	1.52	1.23	1.58	1.21	8.8	9.5
Single divorced (N = 53)	10.1	12.0	3.2	3.8	1.68	1.85	0.70	0.94	2.16	1.99	1.41	1.28	12.1	13.0
Single widowed (N = 372)	11.7	15.9	3.8	4.6	1.65	1.80	0.96	1.02	2.17	1.99	1.13	0.88	11.0	10.9
Unmarried, LAT (N = 29)	13.7	15.0	4.0	4.5	1.58	1.89	0.63	0.83	1.56	0.94	1.01	0.60	7.5	8.8
Unmarried, cohabiting (N = 21)	11.6	12.8	3.4	4.5	1.58	1.45	0.78	0.65	1.29	0.07	1.29	0.74	7.5	4.3
Married (N = 630)	13.8	17.4	4.6	5.3	1.68	1.56	0.75	0.91	0.84	0.75	0.88	0.82	7.0	7.2
All (N = 1164)	12.8	16.2	4.2	4.8	1.65	1.66	0.81	0.93	1.38	1.22	1.03	0.87	8.6	8.8

Note: Weighted data. N is equal in the 2 years.

LAT = Living apart together.

Table 2. Analysis of Variance in Seven Outcomes Among Respondents Aged 55–69: Test of Effects (*F*-value)

	Network size (0–80)	Network diversity (0–12)	Emotional support received (0–3)	Instrumental support received (0–3)	Emotional loneliness (0–6)	Social loneliness (0–5)	Depressive symptoms (0–60)
Corrected Model	23.7***	41.2***	13.7***	4.5***	33.7***	10.1***	14.4***
Intercept	132.3***	263.8***	135.3***	62.8***	12.9***	0.0	24.3***
Age	45.1***	66.6***	7.8**	13.7***	0.1	9.1**	0.4
Year	30.9***	28.8***	1.1	1.6	0.2	0.1	0.2
Marital Status	37.1***	130.6***	2.6	9.6***	126.5***	40.7***	33.2***
Gender	18.5***	32.6***	57.0***	7.7**	6.2*	14.5***	9.0**
Year × Marital status	0.9	0.6	6.4***	2.0	1.1	0.2	0.9
Year × Gender	1.5	2.9	6.6*	4.7*	0.2	0.9	2.4
Marital status × Gender	1.8	3.0*	3.0*	2.0	3.9**	2.7*	0.4
Year × Marital status × Gender	0.7	0.4	6.3***	0.8	2.0	1.0	2.3
R ²	.12	.20	.08	.03	.16	.06	.08

Note: $N = 2,721$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 3. Analysis of Variance in Seven Outcomes Among Respondents Aged 70–84: Test of Effects (*F*-value)

	Network size (0–80)	Network diversity (0–12)	Emotional support received (0–3)	Instrumental support received (0–3)	Emotional loneliness (0–6)	Social loneliness (0–5)	Depressive symptoms (0–60)
Corrected Model	14.8***	29.2***	7.1***	5.9***	25.7***	4.8***	13.3***
Intercept	67.8***	136.9***	77.2***	0.3	0.2	1.5	0.2
Age	19.6***	35.0***	11.9***	12.8***	9.4**	12.2***	15.6***
Year	16.0***	22.7***	8.0**	8.0**	2.6	5.8*	0.8
Marital Status	23.8***	93.2***	2.4	5.4**	95.2***	10.8***	26.8***
Gender	17.6***	22.8***	28.2***	1.9	2.2	3.6	0.6
Year × Marital status	2.6*	0.7	7.1***	1.1	0.4	1.5	0.9
Year × Gender	2.1	0.6	0.0	0.0	0.5	0.0	0.4
Marital status × Gender	2.5	0.3	1.2	5.0**	7.3***	0.5	2.9*
Year × Marital status × Gender	2.7*	0.5	1.1	0.5	4.6**	1.4	1.3
R ²	.09	.17	.05	.04	.14	.03	.08

Note: $N = 2,234$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

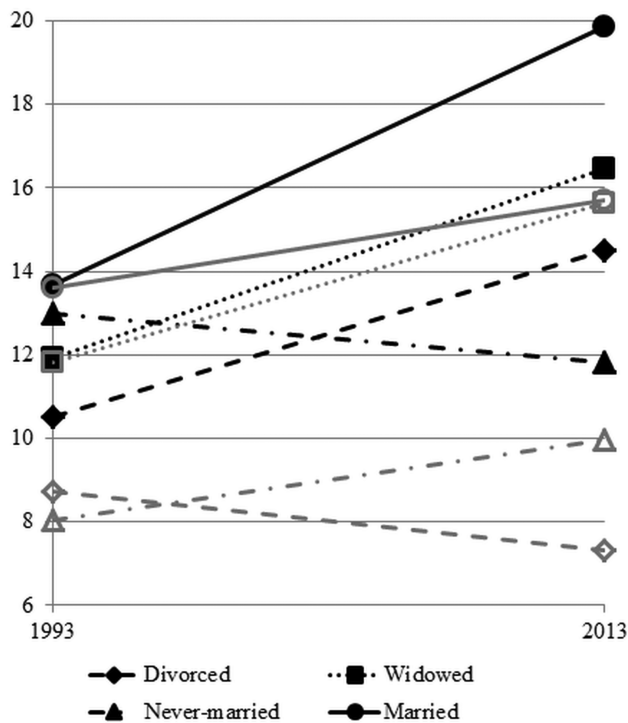


Figure 1. Network size by marital status and year of observation among respondents aged 70–84 years (for men in gray and for women in black). $N = 2,334$. Estimated marginal means are derived from general linear modeling and presented for respondents aged 77.7 years.

contrast to stability among widowers (2.42 in 1993 and 2.52 in 2013).

Discussion

We investigated whether single unmarried older adults were better off socially in 2013 than in 1993. Our hypotheses found, at best, partial support; more hypotheses were rejected in the tests than were supported. Changes were more present in the older respondents than in the young-old.

We hypothesized that the divorced are increasingly better off socially (Hypothesis 1). The only finding in line with this hypothesis was a larger network size in 2013 than in 1993 among the oldest women, but the increase in mean network size was smaller compared with that of the widowed and the married. We also argued that the widowed are decreasingly well-off socially (Hypothesis 2). Conversely, widowed made the largest gains among the unmarried between 1993 and 2013, as they have a larger network size and receive more emotional support; additionally, emotional loneliness among widows decreased. For the never-married, we expected no cohort differences (Hypothesis 3). Regarding network size, we find support for this hypothesis, but we also observe an increase in emotional support received among young-old men and the oldest and decreasing and increasing emotional loneliness among the oldest men and women, respectively.

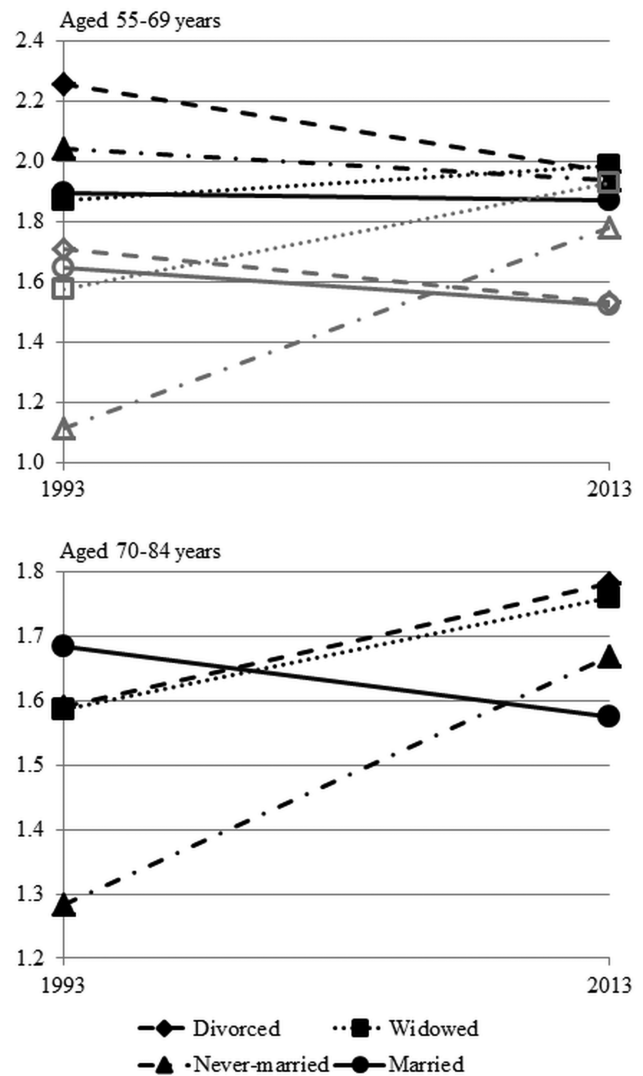


Figure 2. Emotional support received by marital status and year of observation for respondents aged 55–69 (above; for men in grey and for women in black) and aged 70–84 (below). $N = 2,721$ and $2,334$, respectively. Estimated marginal means are derived from general linear modeling and presented for respondents aged 62.6 and 77.7 years, respectively.

Taken together the widowed are the “winners” socially in contemporary society. Based on the idea that the widowed are not used to navigating social life alone and that stigma is less of an issue, we did not expect this at the outset. Changes in “normality” of the event could provide an explanation. Currently, widowhood occurs much later in life than it did before (Statistics Netherlands, 2017). These changes make widowhood less normative among the age categories in our study. Therefore, the widowed might receive more attention from their network. Additionally, widowhood might result in more social embeddedness, contact, and received support (Cornwell, Laumann, & Schumm, 2008; Guiaux, Van Tilburg, & Broese van Groenou, 2007). The widowed might be better able to retain the relationships built up across their married life than

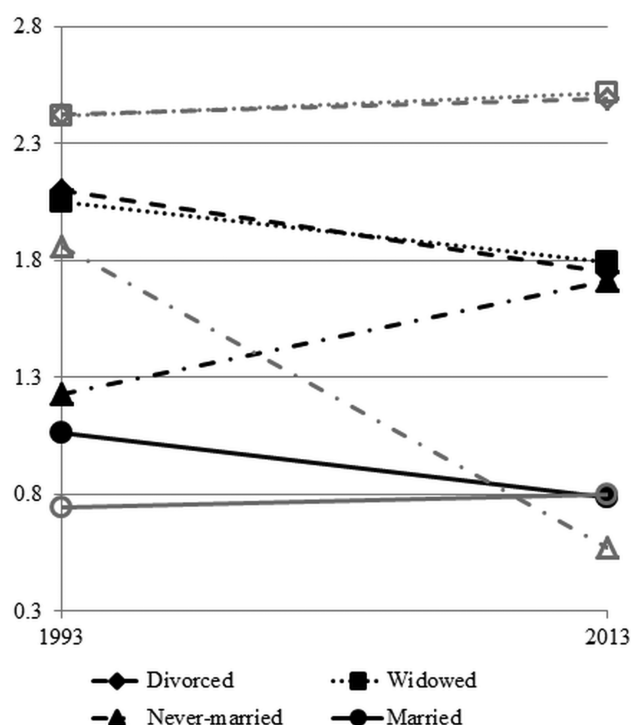


Figure 3. Emotional loneliness by marital status and year of observation among respondents aged 70–84 years (for men in gray and for women in black). $N = 2,334$. Estimated marginal means are derived from general linear modeling and presented for respondents aged 77.7 years.

before (i.e., feeling less like “the fifth wheel on the wagon”). We did not examine the effect of a changing marital status. Future studies can shed more light on longitudinal changes in networks and well-being before and after the transition into widowhood in contemporary society.

The picture of changes among single unmarried between 1993 and 2013 is rather nuanced. There were positive changes in network size and received emotional support, but contrary to other unmarried categories we observed more loneliness among for unmarried women. There might be a mix of two contradictory developments. As evidenced by our findings, the structural and functional characteristics of the networks of the unmarried have mostly improved. However, at the same time, individual and societal expectations for social well-being have become higher. The subjective well-being of the Dutch population has not improved much since 1984, despite life situations, as measured among others by health, housing, and social participation, generally becoming better (Boelhouwer, 2010).

Although we do not find many significant changes among the single unmarried, these provide us with equally important information about how societal changes have not influenced social functioning in the expected way. Suanet, Van Tilburg, and Broese van Groenou (2013) showed rather positive trends in social functioning. Many societal changes invoked to explain cohort changes suggest that single unmarried people would be better off socially

today. For example, developments in information and communication technologies could be particularly helpful for those that lack a partner in the household. As we did not observe such positive trends, we conclude that single unmarried older adults remain a risk group with regard to social well-being and that continued efforts should be dedicated to designing adequate interventions.

We find little support for the anticipated gender differences (Hypothesis 4). Older divorced women improved in terms of network size, and older widows improved in terms of emotional loneliness. In contrast to the hypothesis, young-old never-married men and widowers improved in terms of emotional support received, and older never-married men improved in terms of emotional loneliness. We suggest two explanations for these findings. First, formerly married women experienced a decline in the kin keeper role across generations (Salari & Zhang, 2006); however, they benefitted from the larger diversity in social roles. Second, never-married men and widowers perceive more opportunities and are better equipped to invest emotionally in social ties, which would align with the male sex role emancipation discourse (Messner, 1998). Social liberation of women thus seems to have coincided with an emotional liberation of men. Future research can investigate gender differences in social well-being across cohorts in relation to shifting gender roles more in depth.

We also want to draw attention to design issues. First, the observed marital status effects could be caused partly by differential selection (Mastekaasa, 1992). In old age, however, most marriage transitions have already taken place, so reversed causality is less likely here. Second, the analyses on change between 1993 and 2016 pertained only to those who are single and unmarried, and those who are married and have a spouse. After presenting descriptive data, we have excluded the unmarried with a partner. The category of unmarried with a partner was larger in 2013 than in 1993, reflecting that older adults in recent generations more often have a “living apart together” relationship or cohabit (De Jong Gierveld, 2004). These partner relationships are not as formal as marriage, and cohabitation in particular is an alternative to remarriage (Brown & Wright, 2017). These nonmarriage partnerships do provide people with protection against loneliness but leave their options open. Attitudes about nonmarital and marital partnerships differ (Treas et al., 2014). We observed that unmarried people with an LAT partner were between the married and single unmarried in networks and well-being and that cohabiting unmarried older adults were more like married people. Third, we only explain a small part of the variance in social well-being by cohort, marital status and interactions. Thus, although marital status is of great importance, it is in no way defining for networks and well-being.

Finally, we want to make a note on the generalizability of our findings in the global context. Our study was conducted in the Netherlands, which has less traditional views on family matters than most other Western countries,

including the United States, and developing countries (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). We do not observe large shifts in the networks and psychological well-being of the unmarried. In social contexts in which people held, on average, more traditional views, or attitude change was greater, more rapid gains in the networks and well-being can be expected. We also expect more similarity between different Western social contexts in social network variables than depressive symptoms. Previous studies on cohort changes in network characteristics suggested that trends in the Netherlands are largely similar to those in the United States, for example (Ajrouch, Akiyama, & Antonucci, 2007). For depressive symptoms, this is less likely to be the case. Research investigating changes in depressive symptoms between 1992 and 2002 among older U.S. adults suggests a strong increase in major depression (Compton, Conway, Stinson, & Grant, 2006), whereas we found little evidence for such a large increase. Because depressive symptoms among older adults depend on many more factors, for example financial conditions and chronic stress levels, cohort changes in depressive symptoms might differ between the Netherlands and other countries. Future research could investigate changes in depressive symptoms for different marital status categories in other countries.

To conclude, we investigated how the networks and well-being of Dutch single unmarried older adults differed between 1993 and 2013 and related these differences to societal change. We observe a mixed picture. There was little change in the young-old between 1993 and 2013, suggesting that the young-old are from birth cohorts for which the proposed changes have already occurred prior to 1993. The older unmarried have advanced in both the structural and emotional aspects of the network between 1993 and 2013.

Funding

This work was supported by a grant to the Longitudinal Aging Study Amsterdam from the Netherlands Ministry of Health Welfare and Sports, Directorate of Long-Term Care. The data collection in 2012–2013 was supported by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) in the framework of the project “New Cohorts of young old in the 21st century” (file number 480-10-014). B. Suanet’s work was supported by a Veni grant from the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) (file number 451-14-019).

Conflict of Interest

None reported.

Author Contributions

T. G. van Tilburg planned the study, performed the data analysis, and wrote parts of the paper. B. Suanet planned the study, and wrote parts of the paper.

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